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ABSTRACT

This document outlines the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants and gives suggestions for making their initial contact with teaching easier. Teaching assistants can overcome first-job apprehension by acquiring information about the assignment through the course instructor, faculty advisor, and other teaching assistants. Benefits accruing to teaching assistants are job experience, financial benefits, and content knowledge. Duties range from grading papers, leading seminars and discussion groups, and preparing teaching materials. Rewards of teaching rely mainly on thorough preparation for classes and discussion groups. Teaching assistants can enhance the their students' learning through clarity in their instructions and by offering encouragement. However, they need not use office time by giving student information on assignments that has already been presented in class. In marking student papers, teaching assistants should make constructive comments and be positive. Teaching assistants must maintain professional conduct and create opportunities for feedback with the course lecturer. A selected bibliography is provided. (SM)

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GUIDELINES
FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN GEOGRAPHY

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The materials in the Special Collection on the Training of Teaching Assistants were developed through the active efforts of numerous educators who first met at the 1986 National Conference on the Institutional Responsibilities and Responses in the Employment and Education of Teaching Assistants held at the Ohio State University. Assisted by more than 80 individuals, the committee chairs listed below were able to establish the collection which will be developed and maintained by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Higher Education. This arrangement will enable faculty members, faculty developers, administrators, TA supervisors, and graduate teaching assistants to have access to TA training materials produced by institutions across the nation.

Task Force on Establishing a National Clearinghouse of Materials Developed for TA Training

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I gratefully acknowledge the considerable assistance and constructive criticism offered to me by the undergraduate students, the new graduate students of 1978, and the faculty of the Geography Department of the University of Waterloo. My most sincere thanks are extended to Drs. Ralph Krueger and Chris Knapper for their unwavering guidance and commitment to this project.

Andrew Cotton

Preface to the Second Edition:

Based on our experience and that of our fellow graduates, it was felt that modification to the "Cotton Report" would enhance the paper. As editors of the booklet, we have added to and restructured the original report to provide further insights to prospective T.A.'s. At the same time, an accompanying paper, the "Graduate Orientation Document" has been produced to outline pertinent information for incoming graduates and to detail sources of assistance available at the University of Waterloo.

Throughout the report we have tried to replicate the unique style of the report's original author, Andrew Cotton.

Graham Smith and Richard Wallis

THE BONES (For those who only have time for summaries):

INTRODUCTION:

The rationale behind the compilation and writing of the document is explained on ....

. . . . Page 1

ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION:

If you do not want to teach and have a scholarship, or are independently wealthy, tell the Graduate Officer immediately. A Research Assistantship is hard to get and must be arranged well in advance. However, read the next section before you do anything dramatic.

. . . . Page 2

INITIAL CONTACTS:

If you are freaked out by the prospect of teaching, or have any other problems, talk to other grads, the lecturer for your assigned course, the Graduate Officer and your tentative advisor.

. . . . Page 2

THE ROLES OF THE TEACHING ASSISTANT:

The T.A. not only teaches, but also acts as a bridge between the students and the lecturer.

. . . . Page 3

BENEFITS OF A TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP:

The money is good, and the experience is invaluable.

. . . . Page 3

RANGE OF DUTIES:

You are asked to work a maximum of 10 hours a week for the whole term, including exams, so in any one week you may do much more or much less than the 10 hours. Your teaching tasks could include marking, leading discussions, guiding labs. or taking field trips.

. . . . Page 4

TEACHING - PREPARATION FOR THE CLASS:

Talk with the lecturer well before the first class and meet with any other T.A.'s on the course. Overcome obvious deficiencies before you start teaching. If you are a foreign student, learn as quickly as you can about the Canadian academic situation. If you have a problem, the course lecturer will be only too pleased to help. Teaching aids are freely available, but make sure that you are familiar with their use. The open approach shown to you by faculty members should guide you in your relations with students. Warm and friendly attitudes are best.

. . . . Page 4

THE FIRST CLASS:

Know the material and the objectives beforehand. Introduce yourself, speak slowly and write your name on the board. Ask the students for their names and I.D. numbers. Make your expectations of them clear, especially as to where, when, and how often they have to hand in assignments. In consultation with the students, decide on "office" hours. Give the students adequate warning if you will not be in your office at these times. Be prepared to answer any questions put forth by the class.

. . . . Page 7

CLASSROOM MANNER AND COMMUNICATION:

Be clear, friendly and encouraging. Do not be arrogant.

. . . . Page 8

LECTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LECTURER:

Go to the lectures if you can fit them in. You can then more effectively relate your own teaching to the lecture material. Have regular meetings with all the T.A.'s and the lecturer for the course.

. . . . Page 8

LANGUAGE:

Make sure that the students can understand you. Make it clear that the students should ask you to repeat things that they do not understand.

. . . . Page 9

CLASS PARTICIPATION:

Class participation takes a while to build up. Do everything possible to make it easy for students to communicate with you. Ask simpler questions to get things started. Ask questions of specific students, but do not make them uncomfortable. Form small groups, and ask one student to report back on group discussion.

. . . . Page 9

FEEDBACK:

Informal feedback is very helpful for both yourself and the course lecturer. Allow opportunities for it.

. . . . Page 10

MARKING:

Never cut short on the quality of marking. Use a contrasting pen and look through several papers before assigning final grades. Work with other T.A.'s for the course so that your marking standards are similar. Mark positively and make constructive comments. Make sure that the students are clear as to where they went wrong. Record the marks carefully and, if possible, store them in duplicate. If you get tired or annoyed, take a break.

. . . . Page 11

MARKING SCHEMES . . . . . Page 13

CHEATING, LYING AND OTHER NASTY THINGS:

Copying and plagiarism are the most likely problems. Explain to the students what constitutes plagiarism, and in the case of copying, a quiet word with the students concerned is usually sufficient. In some cases, students will have worked together on the same project. For serious cheating, keep the evidence and see the lecturer.

. . . . Page 14

POOR AND ANOMALOUS MARKS:

Firstly, is it your fault or the student's? Or a combination? You can help them on a personal level. Assistance with writing is offered by the Writing Clinic, and several good texts on organization and style are available, as well as a Study Skills Counsellor.

. . . . Page 14

LENGTH OF INSTRUCTIONAL SESSIONS AND ATTENDANCE:

Ask the lecturer about his policy on this. Stress the desirability of attendance, and avoid repeating instructions that should have been acquired during the teaching session.

. . . . Page 15

PROFESSIONALISM AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

Do not gossip about lecturers, whine about the course, or give out final marks for the course.

. . . . Page 16

ANNOTATED SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Some valuable references.

. . . . Page 17

INTRODUCTION:

The primary purpose of this modest booklet is to ease the burden for new Teaching Assistants (T.A.'s) coming into the Geography Department, and to help them become more effective teachers. It is intended to be a practical document with immediate applications; an assistance donor and apprehension dissipator. It is also hoped that faculty members may be able to benefit from a knowledge of the teaching problems as perceived by T.A.'s.

For the new graduate student, the final acceptance of a position brings welcome relief from the continual and lengthy process of shuffling paper and filling out forms. Unfortunately, the brief pre-term respite may be disrupted by a flash of apprehension. To replenish an emaciated chequing account one must teach part of a course in the department and, perhaps not so incidentally, begin to shoulder some unanticipated responsibilities.

From graduate seminar discussions during the fall of 1978 came the idea of pooling T.A. experiences of the problems and rewards associated with instruction at this level. The new graduates felt that a composite of individual experience would form the core of a range of helpful suggestions that could be passed on to future T.A.'s. In the practical spirit with which this document was compiled, an annotated table of contents and an annotated bibliography provide quick and easy access to vital information.

This booklet is an evolving document. It represents contributions from faculty, graduates and students, and will, hopefully, be modified by graduate students in succeeding years in the light of their own experiences and needs. It represents the basis of a problem-solving approach to the task of being a Teaching Assistant. As a Teaching Assistant, its benefit to you can be augmented by any comments and suggestions you may have regarding its improvement.

ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION:

Alternatives to a Teaching Assistantship exist and several immediately spring to mind. The system presents three alternatives: teach, do not teach, or come to a mutually agreeable alternative. The alternative would most likely be in the form of a Research Assistantship. Realistically, the latter falls within the list of Canada's endangered species and not surprisingly, since the department has a basic need of, and budget for, teaching assistance, but has no funds for research assistance. A Research Assistantship can be arranged only through a faculty member who has a research grant which permits employment of students to help with a specific research project. Opportunities for this are few, and arrangements must be made very early through contact with the specific faculty member. Thus, if you have already accepted a Teaching Assistantship, it is likely to be too late to arrange a research alternative. The department needs your teaching services, so please inform the Graduate Officer if you are independently wealthy and do not need a position. There may be someone else who does.

There are non-teaching scholarships and fellowships available from a wide range of sources not related to the University of Waterloo. Prospective graduate students should investigate these sources and make applications for those that are appropriate. Information is available from three major sources:

- the departmental Graduate Officer or his secretary;
- the University Graduate Office on the 3rd floor of Needles Hall which has virtually all available information. Make your applications early and check carefully for special conditions concerning eligibility;
- the Arts Library.

INITIAL CONTACTS:

If the thought of instructing any class leads to immmediate anxiety and the decision that this function is beyond your ability, then you should immediately hold discussions with a number of people. (Remember, though, that some degree of apprehension is normal.) Contact persons should include some of your peers, especially those who have had some teaching experience, and the Graduate Officer for the department. It is equally important to contact your tentative faculty advisor, if you have been assigned one, and, of course, the instructor for the course you will be teaching. At this point, if you are terribly pressed for time, turn to the "Graduate Orientation Document" for information on assistance: who, what and where.

Once you have agreed to an assigned teaching job, contact the course lecturer and make yourself known. Check that it is really the course you are suppose to teach, and that the lecturer knows your strengths and weaknesses in the subject matter of the course. Ask all the questions you can about the course and your part in it. Obtain a course outline and any other materials that may be relevant. Ask about any other support materials you could use. Gather all you can before your first class, but be kind to the lecturer, as this is a harrowing time of the year for him. The quality of your instruction will depend on the degree

of preparation. In these first days you will have a multitude of things to do, so get your act together quickly.

Check to see if there are other T.A.'s on the course and meet them. See if the T.A.'s for the course from the previous year are still around (chances are they will be!) and get some advice from them.

Find out when and where classes are, how many students you will have, and check the lectures as they may be closely related to the course you will teach. It's a very good idea to attend lectures, if time permits, so that you are aware of what is happening in class. Alternatively, the lecturer may brief you on course progress. If the course is new to you, quickly analyse the level of competence you need to reach. The appearance of being competent is not enough, you really do need to know your stuff.

While the department tries to match T.A. interests with those tasks available, some courses must be taught whether appropriate teaching assistants are available or not. The department assumes a basic level of competence in the field of geography as a whole. It may be necessary to study unfamiliar subject areas, and all assistance possible will be rendered you. If you feel absolutely (or even partially) incompetent to handle your assigned task, consult the course lecturer and the Graduate Officer immediately.

THE ROLES OF THE TEACHING ASSISTANT:

The use of plural in the title of this section is deliberate, for the T.A. fulfills a range of functions besides the major role of conducting teaching sessions that compliment the lecture material delivered by a faculty member for a particular subject. The T.A. provides both a bridge to, and a filter between, the distraught student and the hard pressed lecturer. The T.A. performs a liaison, communicates student feedback and may, in a small way, act as a father confessor (or mother confessor) to those with work problems and, indirectly, problems of adjustment. Depending on the particular situation, these roles may be very rewarding or very trying.

BENEFITS OF A TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP:

The chance to act as a T.A. brings not only financial rewards but also an experience that in itself is rewarding and of direct assistance in a number of situations. It provides experience that may be of value when applying for a permanent job. You will learn a great deal about the subject matter in the course with which you are assisting. T.A.'s often admit that they learn as much about geography through their T.A. experience as they do through their formal courses. The experience will help to develop an ability to think quickly and clearly, and to cope with varied public situations, this being great for your self confidence. You can more easily sell yourself and your ideas. You can get closer to people more easily. Convinced?

RANGE OF DUTIES:

The range of duties that the T.A. performs may be wide, but at no time should the length of time devoted to those duties exceed 10 hours per week. This figure is computed on the basis of a full term, inclusive of the examination period. There may be one or two weeks when you will put in much less time than 10 hours, while in others you may do much more. If you are working efficiently but spending longer than this figure on your duties, have a word with the course lecturer. He is well aware of the 10 hour figure and an understanding can be reached between the two of you. Be tactful in this discussion.

The duties may be one or several of the following. A T.A. might assist with marking, lead seminars, discussions or laboratory sessions, prepare teaching materials or perhaps teach part of the course in the absence of the lecturer. The most common function in this department appears to be guiding laboratory sessions, often in physical geography.

In some instances you may be called upon to prepare the labs. or discussion topics. Again consult with the other T.A.'s on the course and those returning from previous years. Check with the course lecturer to make sure that this responsibility falls within the 10 hours per week average required.

Finally, supervision and marking of mid-term and final examinations is another task requested of T.A.'s. Although it is unavoidable, these duties are often unfortunate in that you cannot disappear on holiday as quickly as you had hoped. You are, of course, paid until the end of the examination period.

TEACHING - PREPARATION FOR THE CLASS:

This section is one of the most important in the booklet. The amount of preparation you have completed before class, and especially before the first class, directly governs how rewarding the experience will be for all concerned. As the Boy Scouts (and the Family Planning Association) say — BE PREPARED. Of course you can bluff your way through a laboratory or seminar class with minimal preparation, but the students are keenly attuned to the process of bullshit (they have practice every day), so they know what's happening. Your credibility plunges if you get caught. Your popularity may not suffer. You will probably still get paid, but you are not fulfilling your function. You are assisting in teaching a subject, and while specific and detailed portions of knowledge are not expected of you, a reasonable degree of understanding is required. Whether you know the material or whether it is completely new to you, obtain a course outline and bibliography as soon as possible, certainly before the first class. The lecturer will help here and will most likely underline the concepts on which the course is based. Although each T.A. should have been sent "a detailed course outline and recommended readings accompanied by an interpretive letter from the instructor",[1] this, in reality, is rare. Most

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[1]Quoted from a paper entitled "Policy on Teaching Assistants", Faculty of Environmental Studies, April 23, 1977.

preparation seems to take place in the first few days before term begins.

The lecturer will also detail his expectations of you and the laboratory/seminar sessions. Ask around to find out what teaching aids are available and where they are located.[1] This exercise can have its frustratingly amusing side and is guaranteed to bring you into contact with quite a few members of the department. Wall maps and atlases, laboratory equipment and aids such as projectors are freely available for use. Check to be sure that they are in working condition and that you know how to operate them. Otherwise, considerable embarrassment may result, and the teaching session may be disrupted.

Above all, you should be familiar with the extent and location of source materials. There are three main library sources and even if just for your own sake, know the location and potential of the Map Library, E.M.S. Library and the Arts Library. Be prepared to direct your students to other univerity services such as W.I.P.R.G. and P.R.O.B.E. which give assistance to students.[2] Placing books on Reserve is the most satisfactory way of ensuring maximum use of books that are not available in large numbers. The process of placing books on Reserve may take several weeks, especially at the beginning of Fall term, so prepare as early as possible for this. Take out a few general texts on the subject for your own use and let your students know that they are available as a last resort (only). Students consider that locating source materials is one of their major problems and any assistance you can give will be greatly appreciated. Indicate to the students the interests and experience within the Faculty and graduate student body as another source of information and do not be afraid to refer students to other people in the department.

The T.A. handles teaching tasks, interprets questions, receives abuse and may even be the recipient of such responsibilities as deciding the academic fate of a fellow student. While these issues are discussed more fully in a following section, it is useful to address them at this early stage, so that the T.A. approaches the teaching task with a reasonable idea of what is expected.

In his role, the T.A. has a number of advantages over those who are more experienced with the system. The T.A. has generally only recently left the undergraduate situation, or may still be within it. He can, therefore, relate easily to the language, the values and the attitudes of those he is assisting. These are his language, traditions and attitudes, though with some obvious exceptions for those whose experiences of the "Canadian" way of life are new or limited. T.A.'s are very aware of the problems that exist, since they were often their own problems in their undergraduate years. This can pose a problem in itself, especially if the T.A. is at the university where he was an undergraduate, as the different attitudes applicable to graduates and T.A.'s may disorient him for some time. For those who come from other universities or countries, attitudes in this department at this

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[1,2]Also see the accompanying "Graduate Orientation Document" which details the availability and whereabouts of such materials.

university may well be quite different from those at home.

The T.A.'s have no union, and psychological support for any protest decreases as the economic climate worsens. On the surface at least, it might appear that the T.A. must accept the status quo as a state impossible to change. This is incorrect, especially at the practical level, and the T.A. should be secure in the fact that, through negotiation, much can be changed and much assistance rendered. There is no management-labour dichotomy as exists in many work situations. The faculty member and the T.A. assigned to him are a team working together to provide the best possible learning experience for the students in the course.

To those who have just left secondary school or another equally controlled situation, the casual relations that exist between teacher and student at university may be a source of wonder and suspicion. Casual relations are accepted quickly by students, and are usually freely entered into by lecturers. For those who have just become T.A.'s the situation is, at first, perhaps a little uncomfortable. Achieving an acceptable balance between their own perceptions of the roles of teacher and student is often difficult. One of the many problems facing the new T.A. is the one of how to act.

Advice from students suggests that the most comfortable operating environment for them is one permeated by friendliness, and devoid of arrogance. If there was only one "don't" in this booklet, it would be "don't be arrogant". This attitude leads students to be uncooperative and unwilling to make any contribution. Avoid sarcasm. Be friendly, open and receptive to all thoughts and opinions. Be honest, forthright and demonstrate an immediate willingness to help. From classroom responses to comments written on assignments, let <u>constructive</u> criticism be your theme.

Undergraduate peer pressures often lead one to be "cool"; that is, uncommunicative and unwilling to do anything perceived as being silly ("uncool"), like being friendly and answering questions. Avoid carrying over these behavioural traits. Student opinion suggests that an effective way to do this is to think back to your own undergraduate experiences and relate them to your own demands of the students. Keep in mind the question "How can I help these people avoid traumas and traps that I found myself bound up with?" A warm and friendly attitude, even if the subject bores you stiff, encourages participation and leads to a positive learning situation.

If something that the students are asked to do seems unjustifiable, be prepared to modify it or explain rationally the need for completing it. Find out the objectives of the exercise from the lecturer, and certainly take up with him any aspects of the teaching material that are unclear or seem unprofitable. Don't just accept a particular exercise "...because it was done last year".

Let the students know that you care; ask them how they are doing in other subjects.

Enough moralizing.

At this stage it is assumed that the preceding painful section has made you aware of your personal attitudes and bias.

THE FIRST CLASS:

Remember, the students are more nervous of you than you are of them. First impressions count. Take a deep breath and speak slowly. Write the course number and your name on the board and briefly outline your background. When using the blackboard, write legibly and press hard so that your message can be read from the back of the room. Circulate a sheet of paper to obtain students' names and I.D. numbers, as well as their year and programme. Learn their names and how to pronounce them as quickly as possible. Establish immediately that your expectations are of a dialogue, not a monologue with you as the only contributor. Don't demand dialogue, encourage it. How? By asking questions that are thought provoking and require more than one word answers.

At this early stage you are being judged as to your potential performance. Do not be timid and do not be late.

In the first session, let the students know what your expectations of them are. Clarify the amount and standard of work expected. Let them know the marking scheme, the points you are looking for in any project or written material, and define very carefully your policy on dates and times for handing in materials. Whether you want their completed work at the beginning of the next session or before that time, make sure that they are clear as to where and when you expect to receive their work. Be firm about deadlines, but be prepared to be flexible, especially at times of mid-term and final exams and during times of illness. Keep in mind though, that it is easier to mark and keep a consistent marking standard if you have all the papers with you at the one time. Be explicit about mark deductions (if any) that are made for lateness. Being lax about deadlines helps neither the student nor yourself.

For practical laboratory sessions, make sure you know the purpose of the lab. before you start, and communicate it to your students. Let the students know how you will run the lab. and demonstrate the relationship between the lecture material and the material covered in the lab. Be sure that you know the answers to the lab. and how to attain them before you start. (Believe it nor not, it is easier than bluffing your way through each week with B.S.!).

During this busy first class session, determine, in consultation with all class members (if they have found the room), acceptable times for office hours. It is during these times that students can see you, on a personal basis, about questions that are important to them. Two or three half-hour sessions per week should be sufficient to give everyone a chance to catch you. It is great to be able to say "drop in anytime", but first realize the implications of what you are saying. It will be taken literally, so expect a continual stream of student questions in that final frantic hour before your own oh-so-important paper is due. And don't forget your office mates, who may have to sit through all the discussion. It is more satisfactory to restrict and regularize the

hours. Then, everyone else in the office can go for coffee at those times. Concerning phone numbers, if you give yours out, expect calls, some late at night.

Keep strict office hours. Experience shows that a T.A. can take up more time than all other courses (your own especially) and a thesis. Regular office hours are one way to keep a check on the time it consumes.

It may strike you as amusing to set your own office hours and then studiously avoid the office at those times. It certainly is not amusing for a freaked out student to hang around and wait, to later discover that you were spending the whole day in Toronto. Not amusing at all. Be reliable. If you don't make it, leave a message and an alternative time. Post your name and the hours on the office door. Make sure that the hours are appropriate and not, for example, just after the lab. has been handed out, or the hour before it must be handed in.

Finally, don't be discouraged or stop keeping hours if students don't show. They will.

CLASSROOM MANNER AND COMMUNICATION:

The three greatest virtues in a T.A. are probably clarity, friendliness, and an ability to encourage. It is difficult to be specific about methods of achieving these, as so much appears to be dependent on personality. Nonetheless, elucidation of, and advice about, communication in the classroom is one of the prime aims of this booklet. By no means is it claimed that this discussion is all-encompassing, but it is felt that the following suggestions may be of considerable assistance.

The following sections contain an analysis of commonly perceived problems and suggestions for overcoming those problems. It is a synthesis of a considerable number of responses from students, T.A.'s and faculty members. The questions were asked in a general way as to how each of these groups perceived the roles of the T.A., and suggestions they may have had for increasing the quality of the experience. The responses have been integrated into the whole of the booklet but this section deals specifically with those phenomena seen as "problems". The responses have been edited and classified. Such suggestions as "T.A.'s suck...they are a waste of time" have been omitted. However, the justification as to why T.A.'s suck...(and are)...a waste of time is an integral part of this section.

LECTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LECTURER:

Unless the T.A. has had previous experience of the course, he is probably well advised to attend lectures. The T.A. acts as a bridge between the lecturer and the class and should be prepared to discuss and clarify lecture material. Attendance at lectures leads to a greater degree of rapport with the students and gives them confidence in having both regular access to the T.A. and a feeling that all parts of the

course are integrated. Course fragmentation worries students and they have greater confidence in their T.A. if they know he is familiar with all facets of the course. Lecture times are ideal for the communication of any messages to laboratory and seminar classes. Lecturers are generally amenable to any brief interruptions of this nature. Attendance at lectures will make it more likely that the T.A. is aware of the problems, and also demonstrates an interest in solving them.

It is advised that weekly or bi-weekly meetings be held between the T.A.'s on the course and the lecturer to discuss any problems that may arise. If any problem cannot be resolved in this manner, talk over the situation with the Graduate Officer or the Department Chairman.

LANGUAGE:

Start speaking slowly and clearly and stress that you be asked to repeat or clarify that which is not understood. A good approach, in your first meeting, may be to explain a little of your background and suggest in a friendly manner that you be asked to repeat in times of minimal comprehension. They won't ask at first, as they may be experiencing this problem for the first time. Calm reassurance and sensitivity to feedback are needed on the part of the T.A.

If you are not Canadian, and especially if English is not your native tongue, you should be particularly careful about your pronounciation, enunciation and rapidity of speech. Do not worry yourself about it — Canada is a bilingual and multi-cultural country and the students should be used to handling difficulties with other languages and accents. With a little extra care, you should be able to make yourself understood.

CLASS PARTICIPATION:

For all classes led by T.A.'s, the issue of class participation, or the lack of it, may represent a minor crisis. Try to ensure that the class is well prepared and able to participate by covering topics already considered in the lectures or course readings. If this is unavoidable, give a brief introductory talk on the problems or issues to be discussed and initiate dialogue based on your remarks. If your class still seems unwilling to communicate, try any or all of the following.

Scrutinize your attitude towards your class. Are you open, friendly and honest? Your own inspiration with, and interest in, any particular topic will do much to break the ice. Try asking a series of questions that you consider answerable immediately, but sufficiently above the common sense level to let the class know that it is not their basic intelligence you are questioning. Avoid general questions directed to the class as a whole. Use varying approaches in your questioning. Ask for and give concrete examples. Ask one of the class members directly, but avoid making the student feel silly if he or she cannot answer. If the session involves more questioning than true discussion, the manner in which you respond to the first replies is very important. Encourage

any answer, gradually turning the answers towards the real issues. Once the first question has been answered, the session will probably go more smoothly. Do not be afraid of silences. Give the students time to think about answers. A 20 second silence feels like an hour, but may be more valuable than idle chatter. Use the blackboard for drawing diagrams and illustrating ideas. Encourage the students to write their ideas down on paper and then call on several to read them out. This approach puts the students less on-the-spot than direct questioning as they have time to plan their answer, and can now read it out.

If the class is of the seminar type where discussion is likely to be protracted, start discussion somewhere near the subject area. Then sit back and be quiet. Endless chatter on your part is not a good way to promote discussion. Listen carefully and when discussion tends to be irrelevant to the main focus, gently direct, by suggestions and questions, its course back to the subject of the day. If an impasse is reached or the topic is exhausted, be prepared to summarize and give your own opinion. Students expect that you will round off a discussion and resolve problems as necessary, so do your best to offer reassurance. Don't be surprised if the students who say the least in class do the best in written tests. It just seems to work that way sometimes.

An alternate means by which discussion of a particular topic could be approached is to divide the class into a number of subgroups (3 is a good number) and ask them to consider the questions. Present both the format for discussion and the question itself in such a way that it is not perceived as an ultimatum, but is merely an alternative approach. During this discussion, move between groups and, if necessary, offer suggestions. Give the students 5-10 minutes for group discussion and then call on one person from each group to summarize the group's thoughts. Other methods by which issues can be addressed include debates and role-playing sessions. In some circumstances, game simulations can be employed. If these techniques are unfamiliar to you, consult the Faculty or other T.A.'s.

If you are instructing one of the physical courses, the format may be considerably different. Introduction of the lab. may provide an opportunity for discussion, but the balance of the session is set aside for the students to work on the lab. with your guidance. One approach may be to encourage group participation, but individual write-ups. The students will feel more comfortable in talking to you and asking questions if you are casually walking around the class instead of sitting behind a desk at the front of the room.

FEEDBACK:

This term is applicable in all types of exchange in either direction between students, T.A.'s and lecturers. While the formal side of feedback is covered in the section on marking, informal feedback is more continuous and hence probably more important. The comments you give to students let them know what is expected and what is not, what is "right" and "wrong". The feedback they give you either in a direct or in an indirect manner indicates to you how you can better do the job. The clues they give you may be subtle — a yawn here, some doodling there.

Are you being interesting? Is the material relevant? They may, in a more direct manner, indicate how the lecturer can do a better job. As subtly as possible, pass the hints on. Your attitude does much to determine the amount and type of feedback you get. Be attentive and open; this feedback will be a lot of help to you.

MARKING:

Within the Geography Department, as elsewhere in the University, students are not free from evaluation. Grading is a fundamental part of any course, and forms the basis of endorsement of student performance within the department.

Grading can be one of the most interesting duties performed by a T.A., but so often turns out to be the most tedious. The type and amount of marking done by a T.A. depends largely on the course lecturer, though it can be modified by the T.A. in a number of ways. The modifications can serve several purposes. They may shorten the marking time, make the marking more accurate and equal, and allow the T.A. some say in the determination of criteria for and objectives of the marking process. All are desirable and give the T.A. both confidence in his approach and a chance to rationalize any philosophical issues that may concern him.

There comes a time for every T.A. (and the earlier the better) when he must accept the possibility that he will have a major role in passing or failing a student. Think about this early and think clearly. The T.A. is very familiar with the inequalities that exist in any marking scheme. Very early in the term, ask the lecturer to clarify his position on marking. Analyse your own outlook and preconceptions. Together, work out an approach to the philosophy of marking. Determine your criteria for the differences between grades; e.g. between a B+ and an A-. Talk to your peers on this issue and determine their approach. Don't just let this worry run around the back of your mind, but bring it out into the open, and be prepared to modify your approach on the basis of experience and information.

Once you have determined your approach, be prepared to modify it as necessary. The most annoying experience for a T.A. is having the prospect of 50 papers to mark, knowing that each one will take 20 minutes. The following are some hints on shortening the process. However, never should the quality of the marking be lowered to achieve this. If the time spent is consistently too long, discuss the problem with the course lecturer.

a) Mark clearly and ensure that your remarks stand out. If a red pen is used, choose your words with care, as mistakes are difficult to erase (the advantage of using pencil!).

b) Mark by question, moving through the same question in each paper.

c) Set up an ideal marking scheme beforehand, after reading several papers to determine the kinds of points you expect to be made to gain marks. For essays, determine in advance how much emphasis you are going to place on content, organization, style, and

language.

d) If there are other T.A.'s on your course, share the setting up of the questions, the marking scheme and the process of marking. This procedure helps in solving the problem of differing approaches to marking the same question.

e) Take regular breaks to ensure that you don't penalize students because you are tired or bored.

f) After initial experience, modify the type and number of answers demanded such that you feel comfortable in accepting it.

g) When marking essays it is often advisable to review all the papers, adding appropriate remarks and constructive criticism but not actually grading them. Rather, place the marked essays into groups (e.g. good, average, poor) and only after marking all the essays, assigning a grade— it's far easier to affix a grade when the papers are ranked from best to worst in this fashion than attempting to maintain consistency from one paper to the next as you work.

Now that you have a reasonable amount of work and an efficient approach, consider the following to achieve the finest quality results.

a) Mark clearly and positively so that the student knows which points were desirable. If parts of an answer were clearly wrong, say so, but suggest alternative approaches or answers, so that the student knows where he went wrong.

b) Don't be miserable, sarcastic or arrogant. This is far from the best way to approach a subject if you are trying to be positive. It leads to alienation.

c) Add up carefully and record marks clearly in a place where you won't lose them. It's often a good idea to record marks on two sheets to be safe. Avoid leaving papers lying on your desk. Keep them in a folder in a drawer so you can be sure who has handed them in and who hasn't.

d) Where desirable, comment on the paper as a whole and make suggestions for improvement. Let constructive criticism be your approach. Also comment on the parts of the paper or lab. exercise that have been well done. A little praise may lead to a better effort next time.

e) If a mistake is common to many papers, save yourself some time by commenting on it to the class as a whole the next time you meet with them. In this way, each individual is more likely to learn from the mistake.

f) When dealing with essay questions, consider the points made in the answer, but mark the question as a whole.

g) On occasion, when work is being done as a learning exercise but is not being marked for student record purposes, the answers to

questions can be marked by the group. Students can either correct and/or mark their own papers or each others'. In this way, the correcting and marking becomes part of the learning process.

h) Discussion of the best answers can be useful to the whole group of students. Take care not to embarrass the student whose answer you use by raising him on a pedestal in front of the class.

i) Collect due papers in such a way that there is no doubt as to whether the student has or has not handed the paper in. Hand back papers during the class to each student individually. Do not leave them outside your office for just anyone to take. To avoid the hassles of collecting papers, especially on due dates without a lab. session, boxes for handing in student papers are available at the entrance of the Environmental Studies Map Library. Simply place the course title, your name and the course term on the box, and indicate its presence to your students. The combination for securing the student papers can be obtained from either the Department's Administrative Assistant or the Administrative Assistant to the Associate Dean (presently, Karen Steinfieldt and Barbara Yeaman respectively).

MARKING SCHEMES:

One of the most common and pressing complaints by students is that marking standards vary considerably between T.A.'s on the same course. The estimation of the value of a paper by one T.A. may be considerably different from another. Though class times may, by virtue of timetable associations, determine groupings of students collected in particular classes, marking standards and marks given should be similar. The only way to ensure this is continual liaison with other T.A.'s in the course, and formulation of common marking schemes. Swap papers with other T.A.'s and compare each others' marks. Discuss differences in results. If a student from your own class feels he was not fairly marked, always be prepared to re-mark his/her paper. Ask another T.A. to mark the paper and get a second, perhaps more impartial opinion. Do not be bullied into making unjustified changes. If the student is still not satisfied, take up the matter with the lecturer.

T.A.'s coming in from different backgrounds may have completely different standards for marking. Someone from a British background will be very reluctant to give marks higher than 80%. It is suggested that marking be done by letter grades to overcome this problem. The following table is recommended as a comparative letter grade to percentage conversion chart.

Letter Grade	Percentage range	Your opinion of the work
A+	90-100	Absolutely excellent
A	85-89	Very, very good.
A-	80-84	Very good.
B+	77-79	Good — A reasonable median.
B	73-76	
B-	70-72	
C+	67-69	
C	63-66	Fair
C-	60-62	
D+	57-59	Poor, but passing
D	53-56	
D-	50-52	
F+	42-49	Unacceptable performance.
F	34-41	
F-	0-34	

CHEATING, LYING AND OTHER NASTY THINGS:

There are formal ways of dealing with cheating in exams. These methods are well established and the chances of you having to deal to any extent with this are minimal. In the laboratory or seminar situation, however, a number of devious things can take place. Students may copy the work of other students and hand it in as their own. This may happen with the knowledge of the student whose work was copied, or his work may be stolen. The theft sometimes takes place off the T.A.'s desk. Put the students' work safely away in a drawer.

Plagiarism may also take place, though it is often difficult to detect. In all cases, except that of theft, a quiet chat with the students concerned on the values of being honest and the penalties for being caught cheating, suffices to clear up the problem. In the case of theft it is best to decide on a course of action in consultation with the professor or lecturer. In many cases, students do not realize what constitutes plagiarism and it would be beneficial to discuss the subject with them during one of the early teaching sessions.

POOR AND ANOMALOUS MARKS:

It is always disappointing when a pleasant and bright student is not doing as well as he should. Pick up on it immediately, though certainly not in any intrusive manner. (The reasons behind the problem may represent feedback for you about your teaching.) It is often difficult to give students feedback on how well they are doing until after their papers have been marked. Several alternatives exist and the following are ways in which one can avoid these kind of disappointments.

For any papers, projects and essays, clarify your expectations immediately. Let students know what is being looked for. In cases where they choose their own topic, as so often happens, ask them to

summarize their ideas and the literature available before they start work. If possible and necessary, suggest alternative topics, approaches and resource materials. Encourage them to talk with you about the topic and their progress. If we learn by making mistakes, then it is a good idea if those mistakes are made before evaluation is undertaken. Counselling of this type is seen as an integral part of the T.A.'s work. Professional counselling (on emotional problems, for example) is best left to those with the necessary training and background, for example, the Environmental Studies Counsellor, Room ENV. 329.

If the problem lies with the student's ability to spell and write in an acceptable manner, then there is much that can be done. Direct assistance is offered by the Writing Clinic and if the problem is a basic one, then perhaps a remedial course could be delicately recommended. In any case, correction of spelling and grammar is advisable. Remember, though, that many spellings and other quirks that are considerably different from the "Queen's English" are acceptable in North America. The University also has a Study Skills Counsellor, Ms. Laurel Thom (ext. 2464, Needles Hall 2070) who offers a wide range of services to students lacking "effective study habits".

Most students would appreciate assistance with writing, especially with organization and style, and your own comments should be fully supplemented by listing alternative sources of assistance. This help may come from other people or from written materials. The style book most commonly used in the Department is that by K.L. Turabian.[1] Encourage the students to consult this book regularly. The Department also makes available "Some Notes on Essay Writing". Get your own copy, and discuss important points with the class. The use of any other helpful texts or papers on style and related issues should be encouraged.

For yourself, the Graduate Club, the University and a number of interested graduates have combined to offer a cheap, regular writing clinic for graduates who wish to improve their writing skills. If hired individually, tutors tend to be very expensive.

LENGTH OF INSTRUCTIONAL SESSIONS AND ATTENDANCE:

The time taken to complete any instructional session is prone to variation both within one course and between different courses. If we can assume that the two main types of courses supervised by T.A.'s in Geography are laboratory and seminar courses, then, in general, laboratory classes will be much shorter. Be punctual. In return ask the students to be punctual. Attendance at any one class is, of course, not compulsory, but taking attendance is one way to help the T.A. remember the names of students.

Stress that those ideas and methods presented in laboratory and

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[1]Turabian, K.L. A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, latest edition).

seminar classes are very important to any student who wishes to know his subject well. Except in cases of obvious need, avoid giving out, during office hours, the details of assignments that you have already covered in the laboratory and seminar sessions. The raison d' être of these laboratory and seminar sessions is that they provide an informational and methodological base for any assignments. Students should be encouraged to attend the formal sessions and should not expect you to re-hash everything that went on in class. Go over points that may be confusing, but do not feel that office consultation is to be used as a primary information source for seminar or lecture material.

Some laboratory sessions may not last long. Once instructions have been given and any other issues cleared up, let the students go. However, check with the course lecturer about this, as some feel that the assignment should be done in the prescribed lab. or seminar session and handed in for evaluation at the end of the session. Whatever the approach, the T.A. should be available for discussion for the length of the session. It may be appropriate to return to your office, making it clear that you are available to students there.

PROFESSIONALISM AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

Avoid discussing marks gained by students in public circles, especially with other students. Don't give out one student's marks to other students, in fact avoid giving out final marks at all. This function is carried out by the University, which officially notifies the students of their grades. The Department also posts unofficial final grades for each course on the bulletin board near the departmental offices on the first floor.

It is totally unprofessional to discuss publicly or gossip about the lecturers or your peers. T.A.'s certainly get to know their lecturers well, but don't fall into the gossip trap.

Do not hustle the boys or girls in your class. Not nice! Infatuations do occur, and even true love, but an obvious affair will leave the class suspicious of your motives and your ability to treat everyone fairly, even if you are scrupulously honest about assigning marks. The possibility of legal action based on accusations of harrassment should be borne in mind. Take care!

SELECTED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

A Handbook for Teaching Assistants: How to Succeed as a New Teacher. New Rochelle, New York: Change Magazine Press, 1978.

A brief, down-to-earth treatment of the function and form of Teaching Assistants. This excellent 63-page booklet is a concise summary of the tasks, roles and problems of T.A.'s, and its enlightened discussion of issues very important to the new T.A., place it in the category of being one of the most relevant pieces of work available to T.A.'s in this half of the 1970's. Chapters covering Administration, Teaching, Evaluation and Special Problems are the most relevant 41 pages a Teaching Assistant may ever read.

Ball, J.M. et al. (Eds.) The Social Sciences and Geographic Education. New York: Wiley, 1970.

This is a useful collection of papers on organizational concepts in geography for teaching-learning purposes and basic educational principles that can be applied in teaching geography.

Eble, K.E. The Craft of Teaching. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1977.

This 180-page book is divided into four major sections and has been written for those beginning or refreshing their careers in university teaching. It is a very comprehensive treatment of issues facing new teachers in universities. While it deals to a slightly larger extent with the moral and philosophical base of teaching issues, it is perhaps, not as easy to consult on any particular problem and solution as the work by McKeachie. Section III, "Grubby Stuff and Dirty Work" is highly recommended as background reading for any T.A., and the style of the book makes it eminently readable.

*Hartley, J. et al. Getting Started. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975.

This practical booklet of 117 pages is written with general application to all types of teaching in mind. While it is not specifically designed for T.A.'s, most chapters summarize points that are of great value to T.A.'s. Of greatest interest are chapters headed as follows: "Working Objectives"; "Direct Teaching"; "Group Discussion"; "Teachers, Pupils and Individual Differences"; and "Organization, Attitudes and Expectations". The latter two deal with philosophical attitudes of which the T.A. should be aware, while chapters not mentioned may be more relevant to teaching in schools, rather than as a T.A. at university.

*Heiburn, N. (Ed.). Challenge and Change in College Geography. Joint publication by the Commission on Geographic Education, Association of American Geographers and the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1972.

This booklet is a collection of essays and through its 100 pages addresses the topic of geographic education and the potential for change therein. Articles by Ball and Gardner have direct application to problems faced by T.A.'s in that they relate to situations and issues likely to confront the T.A. In general, a slightly dated booklet of interest to geographers as a whole, with some valuable points for T.A.'s.

McKeachie, W.J. Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher. (7th ed.) Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1978.

Very much a book of problem-solving orientation; it holds much of value for the T.A. in its 300 odd pages. The book is easily read and serves extremely well not only in the role of a general text, but also, more particularly, as a problem solver in an almost encyclopaedic manner. Quick perusal of the table of contents will allow rapid isolation of problems and suggested solutions. A highly recommended volume, both for preparation and continuing consultation.

Nowlis, V., Clar, K.E. and Rock, M. The Graduate Student as a Teacher. Washington: American Council on Education, 1969.

A 71-page monograph; it sets out to identify problems and issues associated with instruction by graduate students. Early sections (pp. 1-33) discuss teaching roles and effective teaching programmes that are peripherally relevant to the perceived intentions in producing the Geography Department's Manual, and the broader issue of "who teaches the teachers?", should be kept in mind. This booklet has little application in the problem-solving framework we are considering.

The above books are available in the Arts Library, except those marked by an asterisk (*). For use of the latter books, special arrangements should be made with the Teaching Resource Person.

The following journals are particularly useful for geography teachers:

Journal of Geography (U.S.A.)

Geography (U.K.)

The Monograph (Ontario)

Geoscope (Quebec)

Journal of Geography in Higher Education (International)